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SUBJECT: BANGLADESH'S AHLE HADITH QAWMI MADRASAS: FEW AND SEPARATE

REF: A. DHAKA 419

[¶](#)B. DHAKA 431

[¶](#)C. DHAKA 443

SUMMARY

[¶](#)11. (SBU) Bangladesh's Ahle Hadith qawmi madrasas (AHQM) would not object to coming under government oversight, according to a senior Ahle Hadith (AH) representative, who told post there were approximately 200 AHQMs in Bangladesh, mostly concentrated in the northwest. He said attempts were underway to create an AH board to oversee standards and curriculum in all AHQMs and also noted that mainstream AH society in Bangladesh rejected the views and activities of prominent AH personality Asadullah Ghalib, arrested in 2005 on charges of militancy. There is currently no dialogue between the AHQM community and the Deobandi QM community (reftels) concerning recent Government of Bangladesh (GOB) attempts to regulate the QM system, according to post contacts. End summary.

[¶](#)12. (SBU) Poloff met May 2 with A.K.M Shamsul Alam, professor of Arabic at Rajshahi University and president of Jamiat Ahl-al-Hadith (JAH), a national AH association with 35 district committees across the country. A senior AH personality, Alam said he was attempting to establish an AHQM education board to oversee standards and curriculum, similar to those established by the Deobandi qawmi madrasa (DQM) system (reftels). Eleven of Bangladesh's most prominent AHQMs had agreed to sign on to the board (known as Ahle Hadith Ta'alimi Board), said Alam, admitting that the response had not been as strong as he had hoped. He explained the reluctance by noting that many AHQMs feared they lacked the resources to meet standards an oversight body might set; he said he would continue his efforts to convince them.

THE AH CURRICULUM

[¶](#)13. (U) The AH curriculum is also drawn from the 17th century Dars-e-Nizami curriculum on which the Deobandi curriculum is based, according to Alam. The key difference between the two systems lies in the emphasis placed on Islamic jurisprudence ("fiqh") - significantly less in the AH system. According to Alam, AH thought rejects dependence on the interpretations of the four established schools of Islamic jurisprudence and preaches reliance principally on the text of the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed ('tafseer' and 'hadith').

AH QAWMI MADRASAS IN BANGLADESH

¶ 14. (U) Alam estimated there were about 30 million AH followers overall in Bangladesh. (Note: No official figures are available, but this figure seemed over-stated to post's locally-engaged political assistants. End note.) He said there were about 200 AHQMs in Bangladesh, the majority providing primary and early secondary AH religious education. About 50 provided tertiary level education, he said. Most of the AHQMs were located in the northwestern division of Rajshahi - in Rajshahi city, Chapai Nawabganj, Gaibandha, Pabna and Rangpur - with a few prominent AHQMs in Dhaka. The largest in Dhaka is the Mohammadia Arabia Madrasa, located in the Jatrabari area of Dhaka. (Note: The meeting took place at this madrasa. End note.) Mohammadia Arabia has some 450 students, according to the school principal.

AH PHILOSOPHY: TAKE GOVERNMENT EXAMS BUT STUDY IN AHQMs

¶ 15. (U) The principal said the AHQM system encouraged its students to take the government-supervised alia madrasa examinations, even while studying within the AHQM system. A prominent AH mentor, Dr. Abdul Bari, formerly vice-chancellor at Rajshahi University, was the chief proponent of this practice, he said. A Mohammadia Arabia Arabic teacher also present at the meeting gave his own case as an example, explaining how he had taken and passed the alia madrasa examinations to the highest level (including in English, mathematics and social science), while studying at the Mohammadia Arabia Madrasa. He characterized the alia madrasa

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examinations as "easy" for an AHQM student, given the rigorous mental and academic discipline imposed on AHQM students. (Note: The practice of taking official examinations without consistently attending class is possible and does occur under the government-sponsored alia madrasa system. The fact that many prominent AH personalities have successfully navigated the government-sponsored higher education system - unlike their DQM counterparts - indicates that AHQM philosophy in this regard has borne some fruit. End note.)

AHQMs FUNDED BY COMMUNITY DONATIONS

¶ 16. (U) AHQMs are funded by community donations, according to Alam. Upon leaving Mohammadia Arabia, Alam showed PolOff a tall apartment building adjacent to the school property. The building had belonged to a previous student, who left it to the school in his will, he said, adding that rent from the property provided a large part of the school's income.

ASADULLAH AL GHALIB: LONG REJECTED BY MAINSTREAM AH SOCIETY

¶ 17. (SBU) Poloff asked Alam about his relationship with Asadullah Al Ghilib, a prominent AH personality arrested by the GOB in February 2005 on charges of militancy, included alleged involvement in attacks on NGO offices using explosives. Ghilib, a Ph.D. holder and professor of Arabic at Rajshahi University until his arrest, has also been linked to the banned terrorist organization, Jama'atul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB). According to media reports, JMB members arrested following a nationwide JMB bombing campaign in August 2005 characterized Ghilib as their "spiritual leader." Ghilib is the founder of a large alia (government-sponsored) madrasa in Rajshahi city known as Al Markazul Islami As-Salafi. He is also the founder of the Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (AHAB) movement, which seeks to establish an Islamic state but rejects participation in the political process. "We have our Islamic way of invitation and jihad, which are devoid of terrorism," Ghilib said just prior to his arrest, according to one media report.

¶ 8. (SBU) "Asadullah Al Ghalib is refused and rejected by the JAH," said Alam, speaking emphatically in Arabic. He added that, as far back as 1989, Ghalib was thrown out of JAH for refusal to pay dues and attend meetings and for generally unacceptable behavior. His situation as an AH outsider was only consolidated by later developments, said Alam, claiming that even the staff at Ghalib's own madrasa in Rajshahi were trying to push him out. (Note: This assertion jibed with Poloff's experience of Ghalib during a November 2008 visit to the Rajshahi alia madrasa he founded. Ghalib, who had only recently been released from prison, was late in joining the meeting, hosted by madrasa principal Abdus Samad Salafi. While Poloff continued to engage Samad Salafi in a cordial exchange of views in Arabic, Ghalib engaged a second Embassy employee in Bangla, castigating him for bringing a woman to the madrasa compound and implying that the USG had somehow been involved in his 2005 arrest. Clearly uncomfortable, Samad Salafi made a point of apologizing to Emboffs in front of Ghalib for his discourteous behavior, excusing him on the grounds of ill-health. End note.)

ATTITUDE TO GOB ATTEMPTS TO REGULATE QMS

¶ 9. (SBU) Poloff asked about the AHQM community's opinion of the GOB's stated desire to regulate qawmi madrasas and the dialogue that appeared to be developing between the Deobandi QMs and the government (reftels). Alam replied there was currently no dialogue between the GOB and the AHQM community, nor was there dialogue between the AHQM and the DQM communities. He expressed willingness to enter into dialogue in both cases, and said the AHQMs would not in principle oppose coming under GOB oversight. He noted that AHQMs faced severe lack of resources, with regard to both staff and materials, and would welcome assistance.

DQM REP: AH SCHOOLS ARE NOT QAWMI MADRASAS!

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¶ 10. (SBU) Poloff asked about the Deobandi QM community attitude toward the AHQM community at a May 5 meeting with Mizanur Rahman Sayed, assistant secretary general of the Federation of Qawmi Madrasa Boards (FQMB - one of two major DQM education board conglomerations (reftels)). Poloff noted that in GOB eyes the AHQM were "unregulated qawmi madrasas" just like the DQMs and asked whether there was any plan for the two groups to communicate with each other to present a unified position to the GOB as the discussion moved forward. Mizanur appeared surprised by the question and responded quickly that only the Deobandi schools were "qawmi madrasas," that this was historical fact and that surely the government must be aware of it.

COMMENT

¶ 11. (SBU) The AHQM community is clearly a small piece of the overall Bangladesh QM equation. Nonetheless, it may be cause for concern that neither the GOB nor the DQM community appear to be reaching out to it in the current conversation on QM reform. In the government's case, the omission is most likely based on lack of understanding of QM organization in Bangladesh. In the DQM community's case, doctrinal differences are likely a key factor.

MORIARTY